

Cambridgeshire County Council – Annual Report, May 2022

The Gamlingay Division comprises the Parishes of Abington Pigotts, Arrington, Barrington, Croydon, Gamlingay, Guilden Morden, Litlington, Hatley, Orwell, Shingay-cum-Wendy, Steeple Morden, Tadlow & Wimpole.

Following the Elections in May 2021 the Council now comprises 61 Councillors made up by 28 Conservatives, 20 LibDems, 9 Labour and 4 Independent. The Joint Administration (JA) formed of Lab/LD/Ind members took control of the Council with a new Joint Administration Agreement which you can view at:

[https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/cambridgelibdems/pages/5179/attachments/original/1620984611/County\\_agreement\\_2021\\_FINAL.pdf?1620984611](https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/cambridgelibdems/pages/5179/attachments/original/1620984611/County_agreement_2021_FINAL.pdf?1620984611)

The Chair is Cllr Stephen Ferguson (Ind) and I am Vice Chair. I also chair the Council's Constitution & Ethics Committee and I sit on the Planning Committee. I am a substitute member for several other Committees.

The County Council's move from Shire Hall in Cambridge to Alconbury finally took place in the autumn - but not for Full Council meetings, for which the 'Multi Function Room' at Alconbury is certainly too small for meetings with COVID social distancing, and possibly even permanently. The Annual Meeting of the Council in May 2021 was held amid the war planes of the Imperial War Museum at Duxford.

The new Joint Administration has been taking stock of the Council it has inherited. We invited in a 'peer challenge' panel of expert councillors and council officers from the Local Government Association to look at the operation of the Council and advise on priorities. They did so, and came back in spring this year to update on how we were doing. We also convened an Independent Remuneration Panel, as we are required to do, to review Councillor allowances. Unlike the previous administration we agreed their recommendations unaltered.

The Council's Chief Executive retired during the year, and we appointed a new Chief Executive Stephen Moir who started in post in February 2022. Unlike his predecessor, Stephen will serve Cambridgeshire County Council only, not Peterborough too. This is part of a process of disentangling many of the joint staffing structures set up by the previous administration, so that we and they can focus on Cambridgeshire priorities.

The new Council inherited a budget gap of £22.2M for this year. We managed to balance the budget this time, but very significant financial challenges lie ahead. The budget gap we inherited was set to rise to £86M by 2027, and our 'peer challenge' team identified this as an issue 'of significant magnitude'.

The Council increased its portion of Council Tax in February, by 1.99% for general services, and 3% for adult social care. This was a difficult decision to take during the current cost of living crisis, but many people struggling most with increased bills and prices are those who are most likely to need council services, and likely to pay a lower council tax increase.

The Council's budget for this year included a £14M 'Just Transition Fund' to tackle inequality, improve lives and care for the environment.

The new Joint Administration commissioned an independent review of the Council's development company This Land. This found 'unusual' accounting practices and 'shortcomings [which] require immediate attention'. The review made a number of recommendations, most to be carried out within three months.

The County Council's Farms estate extends to 33,000 acres - the biggest public sector rural estate in England and Wales. The new Joint Administration is keen to reposition this asset not just as a source of rental income (important though that is) but also as a major part of our environmental and climate ambitions.

One of the major changes the new administration made to the Council's committee system was to combine the former Adults Committee and Health Committee into a single committee, making the most of the close relationship between health provision and adult social care. We also welcomed a new Director of Public Health, Jyoti Atri, into post.

The COVID pandemic has had a devastating effect throughout the sector. We have adopted a 'health in all policies' approach; established increased support for unpaid carers and expanded the Direct Payment option to more people.

A major focus for Children & Young People during the year was to ensure funding of vouchers over school holidays for families eligible for free school meals. This happened throughout 2021/22 and is guaranteed throughout 2022/23. The numbers of children in Cambridgeshire eligible for free school meals has continued to increase significantly. We have carried out a high profile drive to recruit more local foster carers and ensure more children and young people in care can remain within the county.

The former Communities & Partnership Committee was renamed Communities, Social Mobility & Inclusion Committee. (COSMIC). The committee has been responsible for supporting communities through COVID, making provision for refugees from Afghanistan and now Ukraine, assisting EU citizens in obtaining settled status and voting rights, as well as a range of public services from libraries to mortuaries.

COSMIC makes decisions about the Household Support Fund, which supports people experiencing immediate financial hardship to pay for food, household energy or other essential items. An increasing number of families is struggling financially at the moment.

The new Environment & Green Investment Committee is responsible for climate change and renewable energy, strategic planning, flood and water, biodiversity, waste, antiquities, and surprisingly digital infrastructure and broadband.

The committee developed two important strategies this year - a revised Local Flood Risk Management Strategy, and an updated Climate Change & Environment Strategy which sets a new and more ambitious target for a net-zero carbon Cambridgeshire by 2045. We are also working on a Cambridgeshire Decarbonisation Fund and Local Area Energy Planning. We invested an additional £109K over last winter to undertake urgent repairs to various biodiversity sites, as well as to begin a biodiversity audit of the Council's land to set a baseline for our commitment to increase biodiversity in Cambridgeshire.

An issue dominating Cambridgeshire politics since the whistle was blown in 2018 is 'Farmgate'—the award to then County Council deputy leader of the tenancy of a County Council-owned farm in Girton. The new Joint Administration took office committed to publishing the facts, and this has now happened. The subject was found by independent investigators to have broken the councillors' Code of Conduct in seven different ways, including bullying and improper use of position for personal advantage.

The new Council is facing up to the many challenges left by its outgoing administration. Not least of these was the atrocious state of the county's 100,000 gullies, whose lack of maintenance contributed to the flooding of winter 2020/21. These are now being mapped

and cleared, including one which was in such a bad state a metal detector was required to actually find it.

We have established a new funding pot for local communities to bid into for 20MPH zones, to make these more widespread and easier to obtain.

Turning to the Combined Authority a new Mayor was elected in May 2021 which led to the scrapping of the CAM Metro and the '£100K homes' project. The Combined Authority's Climate Commission published its ambitious report; the Government announced there would be no more money for affordable housing, and snubbed the Combined Authority's bus improvement plan.

I am also appointed to the Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Fire Authority where I chair the Scrutiny & Overview Committee. A recent Government inspection of the service looked at three main areas - how effective it is, how efficient and how well colleagues are looked after - and found the Service continued to be rated Good; putting us among the best performing fire and rescue services in the UK.

Locally I continue to attend Parish Council meetings as and when I can - they are an important place for opinions to be aired, information shared and problems solved. I have worked on a wide range of casework ranging from mud on the roads (of which there was a lot!) to public footpath issues to implications arising from new housing. I continue to campaign against the current favoured alignment of the Cambridge Oxford railway by EastWestRail and I am part of a team of local Councillors ensuring that Thakeham cannot proceed with its plan for a new town of 25k houses obliterating 9 local villages.

It has been a pleasure to work with the Parish Council on many different issues throughout the year and I would like to pay tribute to those Parish Councillors standing down - truly Local Heroes. As always I welcome feedback, casework and the opportunity to serve residents of the Parish as your County Councillor.

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